Supporting Pharmaceutical Education – Timing is Everything

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Keywords: pharmaceutical education, financial management

“Higher Education in California takes a major hit...” “State appropriations for higher education rose only 1.2 percent, the smallest such rise in a decade.” These were the first two stories in the December 9, 2002, “Daily Report” from The Chronicle of Higher Education, and they certainly affirm that the financing of our enterprise is under assault.

For public institutions, state budget woes foretell stagnant funding levels at best, and in too many cases requests for “give backs” in education have occurred mid-fiscal year. Shrinking endowments hit both public and private schools, jeopardizing building projects, scholarships and student aid, and other programs.

Despite this, many schools and colleges of pharmacy are implementing significant expansion activities and new programs. Some schools of pharmacy have had significant budget increases, even in times of multi-billion dollar state budget gaps. How can deans and their leadership teams accomplish this when the odds seem so strongly against them?

Several deans responded to a query for tactics that work to garner support in difficult times. There was no magic in the answers, just good thinking and excellent leadership. Here is what was learned.

It’s about Advocacy!

For our enterprise, the pharmacist shortage could not have come at a better time! The argument that well-trained pharmacists are integral to the “fix” needed in health care no longer falls on deaf ears, whether within the academic health center, across campus, or in the state legislature. Pharmacy education at the doctoral level is a priority for budget builders even in tough times.

In addition to the contributions of our practitioners to society, equally compelling arguments for support of faculty and facilities have supported increased resources to advance our research enterprises. This includes additional support for graduate programs, equipment, and much needed administrative staff that shifts some technical and managerial burdens of teaching and research from our faculty, making them more productive.

With a 20-year projection of a continued strong need for pharmacists, sharpening our tools for advocacy is essential. Material communicating pharmacists’ value has been prepared by AACP and 9 other pharmacy organizations for the annual exhibit at the National Conference of State Legislatures. Other materials specifically addressing education issues are available from AACP’s Director of Government Affairs.

Paying Fair Value for Education

Clearly pharmacy students have been asked to pay more for their education. As one concrete example, a 12-state analysis of public and private tuition increases affirms that students are bearing more of the cost of their education. Public tuition at 4-year institutions rose 12.4% ($455 annually) while private tuition rose almost $800 or 6.1% in the current academic year. Mid-year tuition increases are also more
Building Successful Research Enterprises

AACP’s analysis of trends in federal funding of pharmacy faculty research, especially by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), revealed that as NIH’s budget doubled over the last 5 years we did better than hold our own. Deans had increased expectations for grant productivity by their faculty and had successfully argued for the “investments” in people and equipment to make the expectations realistic. Centers of excellence that cut across disciplines within schools and across campus have increased rates of grant awards.

Mining salary offsets in both research and practice positions has become more important than ever, as is making the case for appropriate indirect cost recovery. Returns to the school and university have come in patentable or licensable products or technology that yield on-going revenues and incentives for other creative work.

Partnerships

The final theme in virtually every response was “partnering”. Partners might be other academic units on campus to increase support for interdisciplinary research or to share the cost of equipment. In other cases, schools are collaborating with private enterprises engaged in clinical practice, biotechnology research and product development. Sharing personnel, facilities, and expertise allows the scarce resources available in our schools to yield even more success in fulfilling our individual and collective missions.

Making the Case

It is not just a pun to say that the information shared by the deans was “rich” in insight and innovation in the face of such challenging times. We have a great deal in pharmacy to hold up and attract attention, more than we recognize. Our graduates are learned professionals garnering high incomes, buying homes, and contributing to their communities in numerous ways. Our clinical faculty and graduates help society grapple with the increasingly complex medication use issues of an aging population and deal with long-term chronic disease that costs our health system enormous sums. Our researchers are identifying solutions, in both technology and prac-
tice, for today’s and tomorrow’s health and scientific dilemmas. Ours is simply an enterprise worthy of support, now and in the future.

**AACP Support Grows**

I’ve been challenged to answer the question, what can AACP do to help? Reminding our members of the rich data source found in AACP’s institutional research program is the first response. In addition to our annual aggregate reports, AACP’s staff can customize analyses to examine one school’s data against meaningful benchmark programs. More than 75 such analyses were done last year alone.

Beyond data, there are other resources to share among member schools. This led recently to the call for “successful practices” in a wide range of pertinent areas such as faculty recruitment, leadership development, resource acquisition, and academic-practice interfaces and partnerships. The response was terrific and soon this information will be accessible to all members to facilitate program improvements and innovation.

The centralized pharmacy student application service (PharmCAS) will assist many schools in their efforts to maintain a strong applicant pool and decrease the administrative burden of application tracking and processing. It is also our intent to assist faculty with course preparation and related responsibilities by mounting a curricular resource sharing system hosted on the AACP website. Material for teaching gender-related pharmacy coursework will be the first installment under a contract from the federal government.

As evidenced by the response from the deans who provided such a wealth of strategies for today’s and tomorrow’s budget battles, leadership for our programs is critical to not just maintain but gain ground in higher education. A broad program for leadership development that reaches beyond just new deans into all levels of faculty and staff is part of our plans. The next component of this initiative is programming at the 2003 Interim Meeting in Long Beach designed to enhance participants’ fundraising and development skills.

Finally, this editorial began emphasizing the importance of advocacy and that is where it will end. While we primarily direct our staff and grassroots advocacy efforts to federal legislation, the material used to articulate a case for support for pharmacy in federal circles should be equally effective when tailored to local level advocacy. Our reach will grow in the years ahead as the Health Resources and Services Administration supported Pharmacy Services Support Center, the joint initiative with the American Pharmaceutical Association, and several other national pharmacy associations, facilitates linkages between the academic and practice communities in pharmacy with community health centers and other entities providing comprehensive pharmacy services and health care to the least fortunate.

Pharmaceutical education has a great story to tell. Now that those outside of pharmacy have begun to better appreciate the importance of quality medication use and the value of pharmacy services, it follows that those engaged in the preparation of clinicians and discovery and application of new knowledge deserve adequate support to insure success today and tomorrow.